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Turncoat former CIA agent granted asylum by Soviets

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By Bill Gertz
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Former CIA operative Edward Lee Howard, who allegedly exposed several U.S. agents in Moscow, has been granted political asylum by the Soviet Union in what U.S. officials yesterday called a major blow to America's overseas intelligence network.

The Soviet decision granting Howard asylum "was motivated by the fact that he was forced to hide from the special services of the United States which unfoundedly persecute him," the government newspaper Izvestia said in a statement published in yesterday's editions.

Howard, a CIA operations trainee from 1981 to 1983, disappeared a year ago from his New Mexico home, where he managed to elude an FBI surveillance net.

He was charged with espionage and unlawful flight in two federal warrants issued last September.

Howard's defection is believed to be the first time a current or former CIA officer has sought asylum in the Soviet Union and only the second case of a former CIA clandestine services officer collaborating openly with Soviet-bloc intelligence services.

Former CIA agent Philip Agee, who spent 12 years as a spy in Latin America, is considered the CIA's first "ideological defector." He left the agency in 1969 when he began exposing what sources say has added up to more than 250 CIA operatives and agents. He also has allegedly cooperated with Soviet bloc intelligence services in disinformation operations against the CIA.

FBI spokesman Ray McElhaney said "Howard remains the subject of an ongoing espionage-fugitive investigation." Another spokesman, Bill Baker, said FBI agents had "been looking hard" for Howard.

Sen. Chic Hecht, a Nevada Republican and member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said Howard had seriously damaged U.S. intelligence operations in Moscow.

"I don't know the number, but I do know that we have lost [U.S.] agents, who have disappeared in the same time frame, and it is assumed that he had a big part to do with it," Mr. Hecht said.

The U.S. intelligence community, Mr. Hecht said, continues to assess the damage to Moscow operations. But he said reports that Howard's disclosures had shut down U.S. intelligence-gathering operations in the Soviet Union were untrue.

The President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board recently concluded in a classified report that the CIA and FBI mishandled Howard's hiring, firing and surveillance, according to published reports.

The Los Angeles Times, quoting unidentified intelligence sources, said "Howard disclosed virtually every active operation we had. He wiped out Moscow station."

CIA spokesman George Lauder declined to comment on Howard's defection, adding that "anything we say is going to be helpful to Moscow, and we're not going to do that."

Former CIA official George Carver said Howard's defection was a "very, very serious case" because, as a prospective Moscow case officer, Howard would have known details of CIA operational procedures, communications and agents' names.

"Phillip Agee has been called the first [CIA] defector," said Mr. Carver, now a senior analyst with Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies. "I consider Howard the second. It's the first time a staff officer has knowingly collaborated with the KGB and Soviet Union and gone back to them."

Howard, 34, was fired from the CIA in 1983 after a polygraph indicated he had been involved in illegal drug use and petty theft.

His espionage activities, CIA sources said, were disclosed last year by Soviet KGB agent Vitaly Yurchenko, who defected to the United States last August and returned to the Soviet Union in November.

While at the CIA, Howard had sought a Moscow assignment, said a CIA language instructor who taught Russian to Howard for seven months.

But Howard was denied the Moscow post and turned on the CIA as a result, the instructor said.

"He very much wanted the Moscow job, but was turned down and became bitter," said the instructor, who declined to identified. "His wife came crying one day and said he didn't get the job, so they were leaving."

The instructor described Howard as "very patriotic," but "a little short-tempered."

"If someone was familiar with his [psychological] profile, they would have realized he was short-tempered and would eventually blow up," the instructor said.

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